



Teacher Training Programs: The Perspectives of Special Educational Needs (SEN) Teachers

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This study explores Special Educational Needs (SEN) teachers' views on the adequacy, relevance, and effectiveness of their training programs, framed through Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which highlights the role of reflective and experiential learning. Using a qualitative design, thirteen SEN teachers from various Malaysian regions participated in semi-structured interviews. Despite the small sample, thematic saturation was achieved, enabling a rich analysis of their experiences. Data were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis, with trustworthiness ensured via member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails. Three core themes emerged: (1) Practical alignment with classroom needs—covering behavior management, differentiated instruction, and authentic assessment; (2) Systemic challenges like inconsistent mentorship, limited resources, and weak collaboration; and (3) Contextual gaps in training content, particularly in relation to Malaysian cultural and policy contexts. While hands-on workshops and inclusive education modules were valued by some, others felt unprepared for real classroom demands. These insights are framed within Malaysia's evolving inclusive education policy, where SEN teachers often juggle multiple roles with minimal support. The study highlights the need for training programs that are policy-aligned, context-sensitive, and continuously updated to improve teacher preparedness and support better outcomes for students with disabilities.

Keywords: teacher training programs, special needs education, teachers' perspectives, special educational needs

INTRODUCTION

Teacher training plays a pivotal role in ensuring quality education, particularly in the context of Special Educational Needs (SEN). As the demands of inclusive education grow, the need for teachers to be adequately prepared to address the diverse learning needs of SEN students becomes increasingly urgent. International research has shown

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that in-service training significantly enhances teachers' professional competencies, including their skills, attitudes, and values (Tuncel & Çobanoğlu, 2018). However, despite this global recognition, the actual effectiveness of SEN training programs remains a contested and under-explored issue—especially in the Malaysian context. In Malaysia, inclusive education is a growing priority, reflected in policy initiatives such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025), which emphasizes equal educational opportunities for all learners. Yet, many SEN teachers report feeling underprepared to implement inclusive practices effectively. Although teacher training programs do exist, their relevance and practical application remain questionable. Localized challenges such as limited training content specific to SEN, inadequate access to professional development, and a lack of structured support systems have raised concerns about the efficacy of existing programs. Understanding the lived experiences of SEN teachers in Malaysia is essential to bridging these gaps. While studies such as those by Pasha et al. (2021) and Sundqvist & Hannas (2021) highlight the benefits of SEN training—including the implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and the development of adaptive teaching strategies—there is still a lack of insight into how these benefits translate into everyday classroom practices. Additionally, although a meta-analysis by Donath et al. (2023) underscores the positive impact of specialized training on teachers' confidence and classroom management, there remains limited synthesis of these findings in relation to teachers' personal experiences and challenges.

A significant body of literature has identified persistent gaps in SEN teacher preparation. Woodcock et al. (2022) argue that inclusive education requires more than general teaching knowledge—it demands nuanced, hands-on strategies tailored to individual learning needs. Yet, many programs remain overly theoretical and insufficiently practical (Al-Rashaida & Massouti, 2024; Nketsia et al., 2020), leading to what Resch & Schrittmesser (2021) describe as a "theory-practice gap." Furthermore, the lack of continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities further exacerbates this issue, leaving many teachers without the tools to update or refine their teaching methods in line with evolving standards (Codina & Robinson, 2024). Most notably, the voices of SEN teachers themselves are often underrepresented in this discourse. Understanding their perspectives is crucial, not only to evaluate the real-world impact of training programs but also to ensure future initiatives are more grounded, practical, and responsive to classroom realities. Ginja & Chen (2021) and Kivirand et al. (2022) emphasize that teacher-centered insights are key to shaping effective training models and implementing inclusive education policies successfully.

Therefore, this research will focus on three research questions, as stated below:

- (1) What perspectives do SEN teachers have on teacher training programs?
- (2) What is the relevance of teacher training programs to daily classroom practices?
- (3) What are the challenges faced by SEN teachers during teacher training programs?

The study utilizes Malaysian SEN teacher perspectives to establish new knowledge in domestic and international academic literature thus guiding the development of more appropriate teacher training frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations Supporting SEN Education

Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist theory offers a compelling framework for understanding how students with SEN can benefit from structured social interactions and guided learning. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is especially relevant, as it enables educators to assess and scaffold learners just beyond their current capabilities (Vygotsky, 1978). However, one limitation of this theory is its broad conceptual nature, which makes practical implementation in diverse SEN classrooms challenging without specific guidelines. Silalahi (2019) emphasizes that the effectiveness of ZPD depends on the teacher's ability to accurately gauge student capacity and provide timely intervention. Yet, this assumes a level of teacher expertise that may not be present without proper training. Albert Bandura's theory of social learning further strengthens the argument for reflective and behavior-aware teaching practices. His assertion that individuals learn through modeling, observation, and imitation (Bandura, 1977) aligns with the professional development of SEN educators, particularly in cultivating positive teacher-student relationships. However, while the theory offers insight into behavioral influence, it inadequately addresses the cognitive and emotional complexities unique to SEN learners. Heyder et al. (2020) highlight that teacher attitudes significantly influence SEN outcomes, but their study's correlational nature limits its explanatory power. Furthermore, the research lacks specificity in defining "positive attitudes," making replication and policy implications less actionable. Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983) has also been widely adopted in SEN education, supporting the idea that intelligence is not monolithic. The model offers teachers an inclusive lens through which to view student potential. Nonetheless, critics argue that empirical validation of multiple intelligences remains limited, and the theory lacks predictive power. Studies like Campbell & Campbell (1999) and Ghaznavi et al. (2021) show positive outcomes for students exposed to MI-based instruction, yet these findings often rely on small sample sizes and short-term interventions, reducing their generalizability. Despite their individual limitations, these theories collectively advocate for responsive, differentiated, and socially grounded teaching methods that can greatly benefit SEN students. Vygotsky underscores the need for interactive and scaffolded instruction, Bandura introduces the significance of role modeling and observation, while Gardner expands the spectrum of student strengths beyond conventional metrics. Synthesizing these perspectives supports a multi-dimensional approach to SEN training—one that values relationship-building, adaptability, and recognition of diverse intelligences. However, this theoretical synthesis must be complemented by practical, evidence-based training programs that prepare teachers to operationalize such frameworks effectively.

Current State of Teacher Training Programs

Contemporary teacher training programs have witnessed substantial evolution, particularly through the adoption of competency-based education (CBE) and technology integration. Studies by Al-Kahlan & Khasawneh (2024) and Ngeno (2023) emphasize that teacher competency, rather than academic credentials alone, is crucial for addressing diverse classroom needs. This shift is promising but also reveals systemic challenges: not all programs have embraced competency-based evaluation equally, and implementation fidelity varies widely (Cetinkaya, 2024). The Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA), developed by SCALE, offers a promising model for assessing teacher readiness (About edTPA, n.d.). However, its heavy emphasis on standardized evaluation has been criticized for potentially marginalizing contextual and individualized approaches necessary for SEN education. Moreover, the edTPA's applicability across different cultural or institutional settings has yet to be fully tested.

The rise of the TPACK framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2016) offers an integrative model combining pedagogy, content, and technology. This has become increasingly relevant post-COVID-19, with Calderon et al. (2020) noting the expansion of hybrid and online training modules. While such models provide flexibility, they also risk depersonalization if not supported by collaborative, mentorship-based components. Despite these advances, several weaknesses persist. Training programs often lack depth in preparing teachers specifically for SEN contexts. Research by Solak (2016) advocates for extended training durations, yet many certification programs remain short and theory-heavy, offering limited field experience. Furthermore, Cooper et al. (2020) point out that digital resources, while widespread, are often underutilized or poorly aligned with inclusive pedagogies. Given the limitations of traditional training approaches, it is evident that a paradigm shift is necessary. Emerging research suggests that blended models incorporating competency-based evaluation, sustained field practice, and integrated technology are most effective for preparing teachers (Koocharoenpibal, 2023), and this would benefit SEN teachers too. There is also a growing need to include trauma-informed practices, neurodiverse pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching in training curricula. These elements are largely absent in the existing frameworks, indicating a gap between research insights and institutional implementation. Recent global trends emphasize personalization, lifelong learning, and inclusive digital design—all of which should inform future teacher training efforts. Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaboration with speech therapists, psychologists, and inclusive education experts should be embedded into training programs to foster a more holistic approach to SEN education.

METHOD

Research Design

The study employs a phenomenological approach, which is widely used in qualitative research to capture and analyze the lived experiences of participants. The philosophical works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger provides the foundational basis for phenomenology as it focuses on personal experiences and how people understand them

(Neubauer et al., 2019). Research through this framework enables the examination of how teachers of SEN students perceive and understand their training programs. The phenomenological approach aligns with major educational theories that emphasize teacher experience, reflection, and skill development.

Theoretical Foundations of the Methodology

Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underscores the importance of guided learning, which is crucial in teacher training programs (Warford, 2011). Moreover, the study also matches Vygotsky's view of learning as a social process due to mentorship in training programs improves professional development (Meda et al., 2023). Meanwhile, according to Bandura's modeling and observational learning theory, teachers develop enhanced instructional approaches through the process of observing and duplicating experienced educators (Mathur et al., 2013). Gardner's theory highlights that the learning styles of each individual represent a key factor which SEN teacher training should address. The study's findings on instructional strategies reflect this, as teachers valued training that helped them adapt methods to different student needs (Rachmawati et al., 2018). Also, Guskey emphasized that effective teacher training should incorporate practical, hands-on experiences. The results match Leask et al. (2020) when they demonstrated how theoretical knowledge alone in training programs fails to produce adequate teaching outcomes.

Participants and Sampling

The study involves thirteen SEN teachers from Malaysia, specifically from Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Putrajaya. These teachers were purposively sampled, meaning they were selected based on their experience with teacher training programs for special education. Purposive sampling ensures a diverse representation of experience levels and allows the research to capture varying insights into the training process. Participants had undergone the *Kursus Perguruan Lulusan Ijazah (KPLI)*, a postgraduate teaching certification specializing in special education. The sample consisted of three males and ten females, all aged between 25 and 30 years old, with 3 to 5 years of teaching experience.

Data Collection Methods

A semi-structured interview method was chosen to balance standardized data collection with the flexibility to explore unique individual perspectives. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted via Zoom, ensuring accessibility and ease of participation. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on teachers' general perceptions of training programs, the relevance of training programs in daily classroom practice and the challenges they faced during training.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The study employed thematic analysis, a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Thematic analysis followed these key steps. Firstly, researchers read through the transcripts multiple times to gain an initial understanding.

Next, the interview transcripts were coded using NVivo software to identify patterns and recurring ideas. Later, themes were searched and similar codes were grouped into broader categories. After that, researchers reviewed and refined the themes by cross-referencing them with literature to ensure validity. Furthermore, researchers clearly labeled each theme and sub-theme. Lastly, they wrote up the analysis, incorporating teachers' direct quotes to support the findings. The use of NVivo software allowed for systematic coding and ensured that key themes were supported by empirical data.

FINDINGS

As a result of the interviews that have been conducted with thirteen teachers, the researcher has managed to collect nine themes to answer the research questions and each theme will be discussed based on the research questions. Table 1 below shows the demographic background of the thirteen teachers who have been involved in this study.

Table 1
Teacher's demographic background

Participants	Gender	Age	Years of teaching Experiences
Teacher 1	Female	26	3 years
Teacher 2	Female	28	4 years
Teacher 3	Female	30	5 years
Teacher 4	Female	29	4 years
Teacher 5	Female	29	4 years
Teacher 6	Female	28	5 years
Teacher 7	Male	27	3 years
Teacher 8	Female	26	3 years
Teacher 9	Male	26	3 years
Teacher 10	Female	27	4 years
Teacher 11	Male	26	4 years
Teacher 12	Female	27	4 years
Teacher 13	Female	29	5 years

Research Question 1: What perspectives do SEN teachers have on teacher training programs?

Benefits

A study conducted by Magaji, (2025) shows that teacher training programs help teachers develop and refine their instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, and assessment methods. Based on interviews conducted with thirteen teachers, all of them expressed a favorable viewpoint of the teacher training programs they participated in. Teacher 3 has affirmed that the teacher training programs are equipped with techniques and tools for teaching methodology and stated that, "*KPLI program helped me comprehend varied learning requirements. I can use training program methods and materials in my classroom.*". Meanwhile for Teacher 5, with 4 years experiences, mentioned teacher training program helped newbie teachers in the process of managing complex situations in the classroom and she stated that, "*The benefit of these programs is in learning from skilled professionals, whose ideas and real-world experiences are crucial for navigating challenging classroom settings.* This

coincides with a study conducted by King et al., (2018), which highlights that the SEN professional in teacher training programs is very important to provide insights into creating IEPs and adapting teaching methods to accommodate various learning styles. Furthermore, Teacher 8 asserts that a favorable outlook towards teacher training is associated with the development of self-assurance and proficiency among teachers while instructing SEN students and her statement is, “*The training programs are crucial for building confidence and competence for me to teach SEN students.*”. Moreover, among other advantages that were also mentioned is the aspect of how the teacher training programs have helped teachers use new approaches in the teaching and learning process of SEN students and this can be seen from the statement given by Teacher 13 which is, “*KPLI contributes to my personal growth as a teacher, especially by adopting new approaches.*”

Drawbacks

Although all thirteen teachers have given a positive perspective on teacher training, there are still shortcomings in this program that should be emphasized. Teacher 1 has given a perspective on the lack of teacher training by mentioning that, “*Teacher training programs often focus too much on theoretical knowledge and not enough on practical or hands-on experience for SEN students.*”. According to Rojas & Ninoles (2024), practical experience helps future teachers apply theoretical knowledge in real classroom settings. This experience is invaluable for understanding the complexities of working with SEN students, who often require individualized approaches and adaptations. Hands-on experience fosters empathy and a deeper understanding of the challenges SEN students face. Furthermore, Teacher 6 has provided insights on the disadvantages of teacher training, based on personal experience while participating in teacher training programs and her statement is, “*I noticed that certain programs may not meet all disabilities and learning needs. This may leave new teachers unprepared for the many classroom issues they will confront.*”. Meanwhile, Teacher 12 highlighted that the teacher training programs do not comprehensively emphasize the correct process or procedures for dealing with parents and other specialists. Her statement is, “*In special education, collaboration with parents, experts, and other teachers is important, right?, yet training programs do not highlight it enough.*”. On the other hand, teachers often need to communicate with parents and work with specialists such as special education teachers, counselors, or speech therapists to address the specific needs of students. Knowing how to communicate effectively with these professionals ensures that students receive the appropriate support and services. It is recommended that the institution hold more workshops or seminars on communication strategies, such as active listening, sympathetic answers, and precise articulation of concerns and expectations, to address this issue. Furthermore, teachers can practice addressing a variety of circumstances and learn how to handle tough conversations by participating in simulated interactions with parents and specialists (Landon-Hays et al., 2020).

Research Question 2: What is the relevance of teacher training programs to daily classroom practices?**Practical Application of Skills**

Guskey (2002) highlights that high-quality teacher training programs focus on practical and hands-on experiences that allow teachers to directly apply new skills. The study concludes that such programs have a positive impact on teachers' practices and student outcomes. Seven teachers have stated that the teacher training programs they attended were relevant in helping the process of practical application of skills. This can be seen from the statement given by Teacher 2, who stated that the training related to differentiated instruction has helped the teacher adapt the teaching methods and materials to meet the varied needs of the students. Teacher 2 statement is, *"I have found great use for the differentiated teaching training I attended. It has given me useful instruments to modify my contents and approaches to fit the many demands of my students."* Meanwhile, Teacher 10 also responded by stating that the real-world examples and case studies learned while participating in the teacher training programs can help in terms of practical tools to support students' learning. Her statement is as follows, *"Real-world examples and case studies from training have provided me with practical tools that I use daily to support my student's learning."*

Behaviour Management

Behavior management training provides teachers with techniques to handle classroom disruptions proactively. Research shows that well-managed classrooms lead to better academic outcomes. According to a study by Stevenson et al., (2020), teachers who are skilled in behavior management can minimize disruptions, allowing more time for instruction and engagement in learning activities. This coincides with the opinion given by Teacher 4, which is, *"The training I got on behavioral management approaches was quite useful. It provided me with solid techniques to reduce disturbance. Know how to control behaviors enables me to engage students in the classroom."* Furthermore, Teacher 11 emphasized the significance of behavior management training in everyday teaching practice. This training has equipped him with specific techniques to effectively address behavioral challenges encountered by SEN students. His statement is as follow, *"I find the behavior management techniques from my training programs highly relevant. They offer concrete strategies that address various behavioral issues specific to SEN students."* Based on the research conducted by Pokhriyal (2023), it appears that teachers who undergo training in behavior management can help teachers develop personalized approaches for SEN students. This coincides with the statement given by Teacher 12 which is *"Learning about behavior management during my teacher training helped me develop personalized approaches for each student."* This personalized approach is like the use of appropriate digital technology in the classroom. For example, for a student with ASD, the teacher can use a combination of visual aids, hands-on activities, and auditory instructions to maintain engagement.

Instructional Strategies

Instructional strategies are one of the other themes that have been obtained by the researcher. A total of four teachers stated that the teacher training programs they attended were very relevant and helpful in the daily teaching process. One of the teachers who has spoken about instructional strategies is Teacher 1, whose statement is as follows, *“The training has introduced me to a variety of instructional strategies that I had not previously considered. one of the instructional strategies I learned is about environmental modifications which means, arranging the classroom to minimize distractions and create accessible learning spaces.”*. The statement given by Teacher 1 related to the atmosphere in the class affecting student engagement coincides with a study conducted by Felix (2022). The study revealed that some SEN students may need a designated "safe space" within the classroom where they can go if they feel overwhelmed or need a break. This can be a cozy corner with comfortable seating and calming materials. Therefore, teachers need to know the best strategies from the perspective of the classroom environment to help the learning process of SEN students. Additionally, Teacher 7 disclosed that participation in a teacher training program had taught about multimodal teaching techniques, which had aided in supporting the students' teaching efforts. He has given his statement with, *“I learned about the importance of multisensory teaching methods during my training, and it is been invaluable in helping my students grasp complex concepts.”*. According to Khasawneh (2024), teachers who practice multisensory teaching methods in learning can help to build confidence and motivation among SEN students. When students experience success through multisensory learning activities, their confidence and motivation can increase. This is especially important for students with SEN who may have faced repeated challenges in more traditional learning environments.

Classroom Management

Classroom management refers to the strategies, techniques, and practices used by teachers to maintain a productive and orderly learning environment. Effective classroom management ensures that students are focused, respectful, and actively participating in their education (Emmer & Evertson, 2016). This coincides with the opinion given by Teacher 3 as follows, *“I use classroom management ideas from training in my classroom, but practice is necessary to perfect these abilities.”*. In addition, Teacher 8 also stated that classroom management not only involves the teaching process in the class but also involves communication between parents. Her statement is as follow, *“classroom management and communication with parents are closely linked, as effective communication can significantly impact a teacher's ability to manage a classroom successfully. In addition, Teacher 6 also believes that teacher training is relevant to the daily situation of a teacher from the perspective of building proactive classroom management. Teacher 6's statement is, “The focus on proactive classroom management strategies in my training is very relevant, helping me to run the class more perfectly and get ready.”*. In addition, Teacher 9 also asserted that classroom management learned while in the teacher training programs is very important for managing classroom routines. His statement is, *“Classroom management is one of the*

most valuable things I learned during training... such as the Color-Coded schedule, such as Blue card for "Reading," Red card for "Silent" and yellow card for "Snack Time." The knowledge gained from training on creating or has been essential for managing classroom routines."

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment and evaluation are very important to SEN students to ensure that these special students go through the development process that has been set by the school and the ministry. 4 teachers have reported that they have gained important knowledge on assessment and evaluation during their teacher training programs. As stated by Teacher 5, *"Training to be a teacher has given me useful ways to assess students that are based on their individual learning needs."* As disclosed by Teacher 8, the teacher training program has helped in producing effective assessment strategies that are suitable for SEN students. Effective assessment means that the assessment carried out is appropriate for the aspects that need to be examined for the development of SEN students. Galevska & Pesic, (2018) state that there are three aspects of SEN students' assessment which are diagnostic testing and assessment; formal checking and evaluation; and summative checking and evaluation. These three assessments for SEN students also coincide with the statement given by Teacher 8 regarding the importance of ongoing assessment with the statement as, *"I appreciate how training programs have reinforced the importance of ongoing assessment, helping me monitor progress continuously rather than relying solely on summative evaluations."*

Research Question 3: What are the challenges faced by SEN teachers during teacher training programs?

Mentorship and Support

Upon interviewing teachers regarding the challenges they encountered while completing the teacher training programs, researchers were able to identify three primary themes related to these challenges. The challenge that the teachers have given the greatest thought to is the topic of mentorship and support. Nine teachers have expressed challenges in receiving mentorship and assistance due to the lack of knowledge among specific mentors in the teacher training programs. This lack of competence makes it difficult for teachers to seek guidance from their mentors. Teacher 2 asserted that, *"During my training, I often felt isolated because my mentor had limited experience with SEN students, making it hard to get tailored advice."* It is not the case that all mentors lack substantial experience; Teacher 4 has pointed out that both excellent and poor mentors exist. This has made it difficult for teachers to teach SEN students uniformly. Teacher 4 said that, *"Mentorship was inconsistent, with some mentors providing excellent guidance while others were less engaged. This variability made it hard to develop a consistent approach to SEN teaching."* Furthermore, Teacher 7 points out that the training session typically concentrates on teaching practice in general without particular direction from the SEN mentor. This has made it challenging for teacher candidates in the program to implement when instructing SEN students. The statement given by Teacher 7 is as follows, *"Training sessions often covered general*

teaching practices, but specific guidance from the mentor on SEN issues was missing, making it challenging to apply what I learned.”.

Collaboration with Professional

Collaboration between teachers and professionals is important. They can work together to guide teachers on best practices and interventions. Professionals, such as therapists and psychologists, can help build the skills of SEN students in areas like communication, social interactions, and academic performance. (Mitchell & Sutherland, (2020). A total of five teachers gave statements about challenges related to collaboration with professionals. According to Teacher 10 with her statement as, *“Lack of formal collaboration with other specialists made it hard to obtain a comprehensive understanding of SEN methods throughout my training.”.* Additionally, Teacher 11 indicated that it is challenging for teachers to build a supportive network because professionals and program participants rarely collaborate. His statement is as, *“Collaborating with other SEN professionals was often inconsistent training. It was hard to establish a continuous, supportive network.”.* Teacher 13 additionally expressed that the training programs prioritized individual work above cooperation with his statement as, *“The training programs focused heavily on individual work rather than team collaboration, which is crucial for implementing successful SEN interventions.”.*

Specialized and Relevance Resources

In addition to the challenges of mentoring, assistance, and cooperation with professionals, the researcher has identified additional challenges related to specialized resources. According to Van Mieghem et al., (2022), specialized resources for teacher training programs are crucial for enhancing teacher self-efficacy. Resources such as instructional materials, assistive technology, and specialized strategies help teachers implement effective teaching practices. This not only improves student outcomes but also reinforces the teachers' belief in their ability to make a positive impact. Teacher 4 stated, *“The training programs did not provide enough resources on managing diverse classroom behaviors effectively.”.* Furthermore, according to Teacher 9, the issue stems from the resource facilities that the school offers. Although teacher training programs offer a range of resources, they do not give trainers enough training to address the scarcity of resources in a school. His statement is, *“I had trouble with the difference between our training and classroom materials. Resources in real class are less than what we got in the training.”.* In addition, this also supports the research that has been done by Luștrea (2023) that more special education disciplines should be included in the curriculum and that in service teachers should be offered opportunities for teaching students with SEN.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study illuminate critical shortcomings in current teacher training programs for SEN educators in Malaysia. While participants acknowledged some benefits, including exposure to differentiated instruction and behavior management techniques, these were frequently outweighed by gaps in practical application, contextual relevance, and sustained mentorship. A recurring theme in the data was the

gap between academic theory and practical application, often referred to as the "theory-practice gap." Teachers noted that while theoretical knowledge laid a necessary foundation, it frequently lacked relevance to the nuanced realities of the classroom. This disconnect may stem from several factors: limited opportunities for immersive, hands-on training; an overemphasis on abstract pedagogical models; and training content that does not fully reflect Malaysia's specific cultural and educational landscape. The lack of exposure to real-life scenarios undermines teacher confidence and preparedness, making it difficult for them to respond effectively to the needs of diverse learners. Addressing this requires programs to integrate simulation-based learning, classroom practicums, and field experiences earlier and more frequently throughout the training.

Importantly, while teachers were introduced to foundational theories such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), many reported difficulties in translating this into classroom practice. Teachers lacked adequate scaffolding during their training to apply ZPD effectively, particularly in assessing individual student readiness and providing differentiated support. This hindered their ability to strategically facilitate learning that was just beyond a student's current capabilities—a core component of ZPD. Similarly, Bandura's theory of observational learning and modeling was acknowledged, but few teachers felt well-equipped to implement it in structured ways. Though they understood the value of modeling positive behaviors, training often did not include explicit strategies or classroom scenarios where Bandura's principles could be practiced and refined. This left teachers with a conceptual appreciation but limited operational knowledge of how to apply social learning techniques to influence student behavior or peer learning. As for Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, while teachers expressed awareness of its importance, many found it challenging to systematically identify and leverage their students' diverse intelligences during instruction. Training did not consistently provide tools or assessments to help recognize individual learning strengths, nor did it offer concrete methods for designing lessons that integrated linguistic, kinesthetic, spatial, or interpersonal modalities. This limited the extent to which instruction could be personalized to enhance engagement and learning outcomes for SEN students.

Another notable concern was the inconsistency in mentorship quality during training. While some mentors offered valuable insights and support, others lacked the necessary experience or engagement with SEN-specific issues, leading to inconsistent guidance and a fragmented learning experience. This variability hindered the development of best practices among novice teachers and may contribute to long-term disparities in teaching quality. To mitigate this, training institutions should implement standardized mentorship frameworks—with criteria for mentor selection, structured feedback cycles, and training for mentors themselves. A national registry of trained, experienced SEN mentors could also help ensure quality and continuity. Additionally, the contextual variability among schools and regions emerged as a vital factor affecting the perceived adequacy of training. Teachers noted that generic training approaches often failed to account for differences in school settings, available resources, or student demographics. For instance, educators in urban, well-resourced schools faced different challenges compared to those in rural areas with limited support. Thus, training must be tailored to reflect these contextual nuances. Modular training that allows for adaptation based on

teaching location, student population, and resource availability would increase program relevance and effectiveness.

The study also highlighted interdisciplinary collaboration as both a challenge and a need. Many teachers felt unprepared to work collaboratively with professionals such as therapists, psychologists, and parents—despite recognizing the importance of such partnerships in delivering effective SEN support. Future training should therefore include structured opportunities for interdisciplinary engagement, such as case-based workshops involving real-life collaboration scenarios or role-plays with other professionals. Embedding collaboration modules into core training—focusing on communication, conflict resolution, and team-based intervention planning—would significantly bolster this competency. Taken together, the findings emphasize the need for training programs that are dynamic, context-responsive, and anchored in authentic practice. Policymakers and training institutions must shift from one-size-fits-all models to frameworks that support continuous learning, mentorship, and collaboration. This requires stronger institutional partnerships, feedback-driven curriculum updates, and investment in professional development beyond initial certification. The use of self-reported data may have introduced subjectivity, as participants' perceptions of preparedness may not always align with objective outcomes. Furthermore, the study's small and relatively homogenous sample may limit generalizability. Longitudinal studies tracking teacher effectiveness over time—particularly in different school contexts—would offer deeper insights into the long-term impact of training. Future research should also explore how students and parents perceive the effectiveness of SEN-trained teachers, adding a crucial layer to understanding training program outcomes. Additionally, further investigation into how well core educational theories are operationalized in practice could help refine future training curricula to ensure better theoretical-practical alignment.

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